

Battle Lines Drawn in Argentina-IMF Showdown

by Cynthia R. Rush

There's no question that alarm bells went off on Wall Street and in the City of London, over the Feb. 27 report from Caracas, Venezuela that Argentine President Néstor Kirchner and Brazilian President Lula da Silva had agreed to meet March 10 in São Paulo, Brazil, to define a "common strategy" for dealing with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other multilateral lenders.

Following a private meeting between Lula and Kirchner, held on the sidelines of the Feb. 27-28 Group of 15 developing nations' conference in Caracas, Argentine Foreign Minister Rafael Bielsa announced that Lula had offered "his broadest solidarity" to Kirchner in his negotiations with the IMF, a statement immediately seconded by Bielsa's Brazilian counterpart, Celso Amorim.

President Kirchner also indicated in Caracas that he sees Argentina's alliance with Brazil as an important step toward creating a "great South American Union."

The agreement to meet with Kirchner is a shift for Lula. To date, he has faithfully imposed IMF policy dictates domestically, taking a terrible toll on the Brazilian economy, while avoiding showing any public backing for the Argentine President in his battle with the IMF and the G-7 (the Group of Seven industrialized nations—United States, Britain, Canada, Germany, Italy, Japan, France), around the plan to restructure \$99 billion in defaulted debt with a 75% writedown.

There is no predicting what will come out of the March 10 meeting, particularly whether Lula will show any willingness to challenge the forces he is now allowing to loot Brazil's economy. Having so far straddled the fence, he has already told the Argentines that he may not be able to move as fast or as aggressively as they would like. Nervous that the showdown between Argentina and the Fund could force him to get off the fence, he called up George W. Bush on March 2, to ask for support for Argentina, because it is acting "so responsibly."

The very fact of the meeting, however, is enough to rattle the Synarchist banking circles that are monitoring this very volatile region of South America on a daily basis. They fear the impact on Brazil of President Kirchner's firm resistance to the IMF.

Nor has the significance of the March 10 date escaped anyone's attention. It comes one day after Argentina must pay \$3.1 billion to the IMF, and two days after the Fund is scheduled to vote on whether to approve the second review of the government's compliance with the loan accord signed

last September. Kirchner has warned that unless the IMF guarantees the review's approval, and the \$3.1 billion reimbursement contingent on it, he will not use his country's reserves to make the payment.

'On the Side of the People'

Thus, in the countdown to March 9, the battle lines are clearly drawn: between those private financier interests intent on sending Argentina from impoverishment to genocide, to collect an unpayable debt; and the defenders of the nation-state.

Last September, when Argentina briefly defaulted on \$2.9 billion to the IMF, the Fund backed down. Whether it will do so again this time, remains to be seen. The global economy is in far worse condition now, and this is reflected in the fact that the G-7 and IMF are hysterically demanding that Argentina impose fascist economic policy, on behalf of the most extreme form of speculative capital, the notorious "vulture funds."

The vultures speculated on Argentine bonds prior to the country's December 2001 default, spending only cents on the dollar to buy up the depreciated debt paper. But the G-7 is ordering Argentina to give these bloodsuckers back more than the 25% of the bonds' nominal value, as a sign of "good faith" negotiations.

President Kirchner's reply thus far to these insane demands has been a loud "No!" On March 1, Kirchner told the nation's Legislative Assembly that more than the foreign debt, Argentina must honor "the payment of the internal debt" to its citizens who must be lifted up again out of poverty, unemployment, and hunger. Fifty-five percent of Argentines still live below the poverty line, he noted. While the President spoke, forces from his Peronist Party marched in the streets outside the Congress, carrying Argentine flags. The LaRouche Youth Movement (LYM), which has mobilized internationally in Argentina's defense, also participated, carrying a banner which read, "The Debt Is Poison—LaRouche Is the Antidote!" On March 4, the Argentine LYM interviewed Democratic Presidential candidate LaRouche on its weekly radio program, "The Power of Truth." (see page 14).

Kirchner told the gathered legislators "we shall not back down." The offer to restructure the defaulted debt with a 75% writedown, made in Dubai last September, is based on "absolute rationality . . . there will be no promises or commitments made that are impossible to keep." After describing graphi-



The announcement Feb. 29 of a March 10 meeting of the Brazilian and Argentine Presidents, Lula da Silva (left) and Kirchner, in the midst of Argentina's showdown with the IMF, has Wall Street and other centers of finance nervous. The two countries, up to now, have not made common cause on their large (and unpayable) debts.

cally how Argentina was looted for years by foreign usurers, and dragged into a debt trap from which there was no exit, Kirchner underscored: "We shall not pay the debt at the cost of the hunger and exclusion of millions of Argentines, generating more poverty and increasing social conflict so that the country will explode. . . . We have placed the government on the side of the people, on the side of *our* people."

As for the so-called vulture funds, he said, they act today "together with the most recalcitrant and insatiable financial interests, [and] try to profit from our difficult situation, carrying out interventionist and spectacular actions to achieve their aims." But those actions are "doomed to failure," he warned, and the vultures "would do well to understand the firmness of our national position."

The Synarchist financiers do indeed understand very well what is at stake, should Argentina not be brought to heel. Thus the hysterical efforts to smash its resistance. On March 3, their mouthpiece *The Wall Street Journal* warned editorially that the G-7 must not tolerate Argentina's "blackmail," lest it send a bad message to other "deadbeat nations." Argentina has not made "good-faith efforts" with its creditors, the *Journal* bellowed. The G-7 should therefore "enforce a harder definition of cooperation." Should the Kirchner government default to the Fund on March 9, "so be it," the *Journal* proclaims. "The G-7 has put its credibility on the line here, and that means requiring Argentina to play by the rules or suffer the consequences."

Kirchner: Usurers Turned Recession to Depression

As Lyndon LaRouche noted, just-deceased former Mexican President José López Portillo, who developed Mexico's economy in confrontation with international finance in the 1970s, would have been happy with Argentine President Néstor Kirchner's March 1 speech. Opening the session of his country's Legislative Assembly, he made clear that the lives of human beings will not be sacrificed to pay the foreign debt.

"Let us be clear," he said. "We know that we are discussing interests. We take charge of the defense of the interests of all Argentines, and of their future. . . . Our conviction impels us to . . . place the common good above any individual interests."

Kirchner pointed out that to rebuild the country, it is important to recognize first exactly where Argentina finds itself today. "We've said that we are in the worst of worlds, in Hell itself, and that the improvement we now see occurring is only the first step upward." There "can be no viable nation when more than 55% of Argentines live below the poverty line."

"We shall not back down," he said. The offer to restructure the defaulted debt at a 75% writedown, made in Dubai last September, is based "on absolute rationality, and on the first postulate that should define a good faith relationship: There will be no promises or commitments made that are impossible to keep." There is nothing irrational in the way Argentina is proceeding, Kirchner underscored. "What is irrational . . . is the size of our debt."

The Argentine President detailed very graphically, the process of looting to which his country has been subjected, and the way it was dragged into the debt trap from which there was no exit. "This government didn't create the debt problem. The debt is the responsibility of bad Argentine governments, and of those who, from abroad, protected and adopted it as a model. . . . But now it is our problem," and it must be dealt with seriously. Under successive governments, he said, only "magic" solutions were offered, that plunged the country into deeper crisis: "The Brady Plan, Debt-Swap, Financial Armor, Mega-Swap were the labels that were incorporated into a daily chronicle. . . . The multilateral organizations . . . must accept responsibility for the growth of the debt. When everything indicated that our country couldn't pay, they offered new loans, that only served to increase the problem of indebtedness, and without preventing implosion, deepened the crisis. . . . Other creditors went along with the possibility of continuing to obtain attractive profits from the high interest rates, which the in-

crease in the country-risk rate implied.

"Argentina ended up paying very dearly for what it never received, trying to buy time, paying enormous profits to the lenders, and their local partners and publicists, but burying any possibility of a future under an immense mountain of debt." Argentina could not be a "normal" country. The destruction of the productive system and industrial activity, "together with similar phenomena repeated in other latitudes, and most dramatically in our *casa grande* [big house], Latin America, is today the most complete proof of the unviability of any model which ignores internal sustainability to achieve integration with the world of globalization."

It must be understood that "there is no possibility other than growth, as a guarantee for internal sustainability, and to comply with external obligations and come out of default. . . .

"The international agencies must respect what was agreed to. It is clear that there is no margin for resorting to adjustment, or increasing our indebtedness. . . . Argentina has reached the limit of its social viability, and institutional destruction due to the increase of [social] exclusion and the exhaustion of constant adjustment, which revealed its most perverse side by transforming an incipient recession into a depression."

'A National Project'

President Kirchner underscored that there must be a permanent and long-term project to develop Argentina. In this context, he outlined the idea of a strong state, which takes responsibility for remedying social inequality, in order to "make viable the rights of those who have less. . . . This is the landscape we must build in the whole country. And we won't back down from this either." The state, "in the role of protector" backed by citizens' participation, is the best way to guarantee their rights. What is needed is a capitalism "with clear rules, in which the state carries out its role with intelligence: To regulate, to control, to be present where it is necessary to mitigate the ills which the market cannot remedy; a state which puts balance into society, and allows for the normal functioning of the country."

Kirchner defined his priorities as job creation, eliminating unemployment, and guaranteeing food security, public health, and public education. He also reviewed infrastructure projects already under way or planned. "In these new circumstances, economic policy is oriented to produce accomplishments—accomplishments in the *real economy*. Productive economy, consumption, investment, employment, reduction of poverty—these are the indicators that matter. The economy sees the compatriot made of flesh and bones. . . . Thus, the recovery of consumption has been placed at the center of the economy."

The "Argentine Project," he said, means that "we have placed government on the side of the people, on the side of *our people*."